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Robin Williams and 47 Shipmates, Suicide takes a toll

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By Douglas H. Stutz, Naval Hospital Bremerton Public Affairs



The loss of such an enormous talent and ardent supporter of our military was felt by many who thought they had just lost a shipmate, because in a way they had.

Navy Medicine is recognizing September as Suicide Prevention Month, but the death of actor and comedian Robin Williams has brought the devastating act to the forefront of our emotions.

When Williams was pronounced dead by suicide, the loss of such an enormous talent and ardent supporter of our military was felt by many who thought they had just lost a shipmate, because in a way they had.

When assigned to Joint Task Force Southwest Asia in 2002-03, I traveled from Prince Sultan Air Base, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to several locales down range and unbeknownst to me at that time, Williams had already been boots on the ground and was coming back again.

I didn't get to see him, but for those who did, his infectious humor gave them a jolt of



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remembering what it was like to be able to laugh and smile, traits not easy to come by at that time north of the Hindu Kush while serving in a unforgiving land wracked by decades of war.

Hell's Kitchen Base, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to several locales down range and unbeknownst to me at that time, Williams had already been boots on the ground

I saw scattered Army, Air Force and Navy personnel who had the opportunity to see Williams in November 2002. They were a hardened, distinct collection who were undertaking deployments a long way from more than just home, working out of such places as Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan; Karsi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan and Ganci Air Base, Kyrgyzstan.



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Williams' gift of comedy was an offering of selfless sharing and manic inclusiveness. His performances talked directly to those in uniform, almost as if he was encompassing and articulating all the random and ribald thoughts we had. It was as if he was one of us, and we were part of him.

Classic Williams: "We're here at the third hole of the Afghan Open," he shared in a television golf announcer's muted tone. "We can't play the tenth hole, because it's still mined." Several days after Thanksgiving that November, there was the

inaugural Mine Field Marathon at Bagram. Perhaps the course coordinators were channeling their inner-Robin Williams. Instead of a traditional starter's pistol to commence the run, they detonated a mine to begin the event.

I didn't know Williams as much as I knew of him. I knew he gave willingly of his comedy gift to help others cope when stationed so far away from home. There are old-hands who perhaps relate his death to the same shock as hearing that Adm. Jeremy M. Boorda, then Chief of Naval Operations, and the first Sailor to rise from the enlisted ranks to the Navy's highest position, had taken his own life.

That shock is mixed with sadness at the almost-numbing loss. There's also a feeling of profound frustration of someone taking their own life...before their time. And Boorda and Williams are two headliners in their own right. What about those we've lost who are without the blue tile or red carpet? There have been 39 active duty Sailors so far this year, and eight Selected Reservists. Don't need an abacus to tally that



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total of finality. If it's above zero it's too many.

So suicide is what depression and other underlying causes can potentially end up doing to someone? And if so, what can we do if we sense someone is seriously bummed?

Lt. Shawn Redmon, Naval Hospital Bremerton chaplain states that simply reaching out to someone about anything can shake a sad person from their confusing and unstable foundation and provide them support to stand on.

“I really hope everyone realizes that a simple act of kindness can make all the difference in the world to someone who’s hurting. Don’t ever be afraid to say something to someone,” said Redmon.

Redmon attests that if anyone encounters anyone showing extensive signs of depression with a possible risk of suicide, to remember to ACT, an acronym for Ask, Care, and Treat.

Ask – ask someone if they are thinking of suicide.

Care – listen, offer hope, and not be judgmental.

Treat – don’t leave a suicidal person alone and get assistance.



“What can we do to help? In most cases there is nothing we can ‘do,’ rather what is required of us is to simply have a willingness to be present with a person in his or her pain. I

once had a patient who really put depression into perspective for me. She said she felt like she was sitting at the bottom of a deep dark pit and everyone was throwing live preservers down to her. The only problem was that the rope was always too short or no one was strong enough to pull her out. She didn’t need a savior. What she really needed was for someone to climb down into the darkness and be with her until she was strong enough to climb out by herself,” shared Redmon.

The Navy’s Suicide Awareness website notes that one in five people will experience at least one episode of major depression in their lifetime. It’s up to all of us to help make a difference. As was the case with Boorda, now Williams, and the 47 of our shipmates lost-forever already this year, any suicide is one too much. Don’t wait or hesitant to make a difference.

Suicide Prevention resource sites:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK

Navy Suicide Prevention Program Website: www.suicide.navy.mil

For more information, and to take an anonymous self assessment go to:
<http://www.militarymentalhealth.org/>

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